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ABSTRACT

A review of the research literature indicates consistent support for the contention that exposure to children's literature encourages oral language development and reading competence. Thus, teachers of reading have an obligation to promote children's literature in order to encourage reading competence. (Author/AA)

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RECENT RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS CONCERNING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND READING INSTRUCTION

By Edward J. Dwyer

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship of children's literature and reading instruction. Various studies and expert opinions will be examined to determine the importance of literature to reading competence.

In learning to read, much of the most important learning takes place long before any attempt at formal instruction. That is, children must attain competence in oral language before reading instruction can be undertaken with hope of success. In other words, a child cannot be expected to learn to read in a language he does not speak and comprehend efficiently. Through literature, young children's oral and receptive language can be broadened. Larrick (1968) suggested that babies can begin enjoying books as early as eight months. This literary experience of sharing books develops the young child's aptitude for reading (Larrick, 1968) and provides children with a warm family experience associated with books (Arbuthnot, 1964).

In two extensive studies on children who read before entering school, Durkin (1966) concluded that these children came from homes where their parents read to them. Further, the parents of early readers demonstrated in their homes that reading is a source of pleasure as well as a means for finding information.

While Durkin's study was broadly based, Irwin (1960) sought to determine the relationship between reading to children in "lower occupational status" homes and speech development. The mothers read

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to the infants daily for at least fifteen minutes from illustrated texts while a control group did not receive this additional stimulation. The researcher concluded that "systematically increasing the speech sound stimulation of infants under two and a half years of age in homes of lower occupational status by reading and by telling stories about pictures will lead to an increase in the phonetic production of these infants...(189)." The babies selected were in their thirteenth month and the treatment continued until they were two and a half years old. Since there apparently was no follow-up study, it cannot be assumed that Irwin's sample performed more successfully when beginning school and learning to read.

Evidence that Irwin's sample enjoyed greater success from involvement in a reading program is provided in another study. Cohen (1968) sought to determine the effects of involvement with literature on vocabulary and reading achievement. This researcher had for her sample 580 second graders living in low socio-economic neighborhoods and attending "Special Service" schools in New York City. Half the sample were in classes where the experimental variable, story reading, was carried out daily as part of the school program while an equivalent control group received no special literature involvement. After one academic year, Cohen concluded that:

> 1. The importance of reading to children as a precursor to success in learning to read has been shown to be vital in the case of socially disadvantaged children (p. 213).
>
> 2. Ego involvement and comprehension concepts are important criteria in the selection of stories to read to disadvantaged children (p. 213).

> 3. Continued and regular listening to story books chosen for their emotional appeal and ease of conceptualization seems to aid facility in listening, attention span, narrative sense, recall of stretches of verbalization, and the recognition of newly learned words as they appear in other contexts (p. 217).
>
> 4. The relationship believed to exist between oral language and reading has been confirmed (p. 217).

In a smaller but more intensely studied sample, Chomsky (1972) found similar results. As part of her study, this researcher sought to determine the relationship between linguistic competence and reading. Chomsky concluded that grammatical development takes place in an orderly sequence from simple to complex and is the same for all children. On the other hand, children reach these stages of development at various ages. Important determiners reported by Chomsky in facilitating children's reaching linguistic stages more quickly are: 1) listening to books read aloud, 2) stimulation of the child to read on his own, and 3) complexity level of material read aloud. Chomsky confirmed conclusions reached by Irwin, Durkin, and Cohen regarding the importance of large scale exposure to the language of books as a positive and vital influence in language development.

As Cohen's earlier study had demonstrated with younger children, Estes and Vaughn (1973) emphasized the importance of utilizing material of interest to children. The researchers reported that interest was an important element in reading comprehension with a sample of 46 students in grade four. They used selections from a variety of areas including folk tales, animal stories, sports, space, mystery, and foreign lands. Comprehension questions were asked about each selection read. Students were then asked what they liked to read about

most and least. The students comprehended more capably in material that they liked to read about.

As part of their study, Amato, Emans, and Ziegler (1973) sought to determine the relationship between story-telling experiences in a library setting and children's reading achievement. The study involved 298 elementary grade level students over a two year period. A control group visited the library for one and one-half hours per week while the experimental group heard stories during the week at the library. Although no statistically significant results were found, the researchers reported that the story-telling group increased its library usage time and checked out more books. In explaining their findings, the authors suggested that story-telling is a listening situation and is not intended to promote reading competence. In this study, the Gates Reading Survey - Comprehension Subtest was used to measure reading gain. Considering the nature of this study it appears that the reading test used provided an inadequate measure of gain in reading power. More extensive and appropriate reading evaluation would have provided greater insight into the effects of the treatment on reading achievement. A review of the Gates tests appears in Buros (1965).

This brief review of literature consistently supports the contention that exposure to children's literature encourages verbal language development and reading competence in particular. It is also evident that selection of material is very important in order to promote interest. Further, Huck and Kuhn (1968) suggested that most children's books must be read at the appropriate age or they will not be read at all.

Teachers of reading have an important obligation to promote children's literature in order to encourage reading competence and the enriching experiences offered through books. Lessons in building reading skills are of very limited worth if there is not an accompanying desire to read on the part of the learner. The teaching of reading must not become the end but rather the means toward a lifetime friendship with literature.

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